For thousands of years humans have communicated by way of various systems of pictorial symbols. One of the most venerable systems of this kind is European heraldry, which arose in the western part of Europe in the twelfth century as part of the culture of chivalry. Variouesm geometric shapes and depictions of animals began to be painted on the broad area of knights’ shields, thus identifying the bearers or their lords, conveying information and sending a message, whether at a tournament or in the field. Throughout Western Europe heraldry became all the fashion.

Over time the fashion persisted and became institutionalized. Those early days were the period in which a hereditary nobility was taking shape. The emblems became the symbols of the aristocracy, family emblems passed down through the generations. Only later were coats-of-arms adopted and became institutionalized. Those coats-of-arms became all the fashion. Throughout Western Europe heraldry was taking shape. The emergence of chivalry. Various geometric shapes and depictions of animals began to be painted on the broad area of knights’ shields, thus identifying the bearers or their lords, conveying numbers of people raised by the sovereign to noble estate, heraldic symbolism expanded to include evermore-exotic animals, or various objects meant to symbolize the original profession of those whose ambitions had been achieved.

At that time the aristocracy was divided into the lower nobility – the knights – and the higher nobility, the lords. The lords’ estate consisted of just a few dozen families and remained a closed group rarely joined by outsiders. In the seventeenth century, the Emperor Ferdinand II took advantage of the uprising and subsequent defeat of the Czech states to end the traditional practice in the Czech lands. He replaced the ancient Czech aristocratic system with the hierarchical system as it existed in the German lands. The rights of the nobility were curtailed, while the property of many aristocrats was confiscated and then sold to families not part of the old Czech nobility.

This led to the appearance of Spanish, Irish and French elements in Czech heraldry. Complex compositions proliferated, as original family symbols were joined by those of other families linked by marriage, or estates newly acquired or of great deeds performed.

For example, the famous general Albrecht of Wallenstein began to combine his family shield with those of his estates in Mecklenburg, Frýdlant, Sagan, Wenden, Schwem, Rostock and Margardt. In Moravia, the escutcheon of the Lords of Liechtenstein, originally composed of a simple gold and red divided shield, was updated in the seventeenth century when the Liechtensteins held the principalities of Opava (Troppau) and Krnov in Silesia and boasted family relations with the lords of Kuenring and of East Frisia. Today this coat-of-arms is also used as the great arms of the Principality of Liechtenstein.

The most important nobles of that era included the Lobkowicz family, the Eggenbergs and their heirs the Schwarzenbergs, the Slavata family and their heirs the Ceninis, the Colloredo-Mansfelds, the Kinsky, the Dietrichsteins and others. Most of these families enjoyed the title of prince; below them stood the counts, followed by the free lords (barons) and knights.

The awarding of orders of merit or the completion of a certain number of years in the military was automatically linked with being raised to the nobility. Newly-titled families immediately received complicated coats-of-arms depicting services rendered to the ruling Habsburg dynasty. For example that of the famous painter Václav Brožík, awarded a title in 1697, comprised a star as the symbol of fame and a trio of shields, the centuries-old symbol of the painters’ guild.

Over the centuries the real advantages of belonging to the nobility gradually faded, until in 1848 they were limited to the mere existence of a noble title and a coat-of-arms, both protected by law. In the new Czechoslovak Republic after the fall of the monarchy in 1918, the official use of heraldry was banned. However, many nobles continued to use coats-of-arms as a decoration bestowed by the state.

The number of new noble titles grew over the years, until by the nineteenth century a title was little more than a decoration bestowed by the state.
of aristocratic titles and coats-of-arms was abolished.

**Coats-of-arms of the Czech lands**

Around 1175, the princes of the Přemyslid family, who ruled the Czech lands until 1306, began minting coins bearing the figure of a lion. When heraldry was invented this lion wound up on the shield and became the device of Bohemia. The lion is one of the two most popular symbols in European heraldry, the other being the eagle, which the Přemyslids also adopted as a family device at a later date. Sometime during the mid-thirteenth century the Czech lion gained a second tail, just as the eagle in the coat-of-arms of the Holy Roman Empire was given a second head. A silver (or white) two-tailed lion wearing a crown on a red field became the emblem of Bohemia, it was combined with the emblems of Moravia, Silesia and Lusatia, the other lands of the Kingdom of Bohemia at the time. The symbol of Moravia dates to around 1260, and consists of a silver- and red-chequerboard crowned eagle on a blue field.

It is interesting to note that the conflict between Czech and German nationalism in the nineteenth century left its mark on the local heraldry. German-speaking Moravians used the gold- and red-chequerboard eagle awarded to Moravia by the Emperor Frederick III in 1462, while Czech-speaking Moravians refused to recognize the imperial grant and continued to favour the original silver-red chequered eagle. Silesia, most of which became part of Prussia in the eighteenth century, identified itself through the centuries with a crowned black eagle, its breast marked by a silver crescent, on a gold field. Silesia in turn had been divided since the middle ages into a number of duchies that had their own devices.

**In 1920 the Republic of Czechoslovakia adopted its own coat-of-arms, in which the lion was accompanied by the small arms of Slovakia, a double cross on three bars. The coat-of-arms of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic from 1960-1990 represented an attempt at a radical alteration of the rules of heraldry. Communist ideology claimed to follow in the “Hussite revolutionary tradition”, and so the shield was replaced by the pavis, the full-length shield of the Hussite warriors. The traditional crown on the lion’s head was replaced by a Communist star, while the emblem of Slovakia was changed completely. After the overthrow of the Communist dictatorship, the state in 1990 returned to the original symbols. Today the official coat-of-arms of the Czech Republic exists in two variants: the small coat-of-arms has only the lion, while the large coat-of-arms combines it with the symbols of Moravia and Silesia.**

For centuries the Czech lands were divided into regions, but these were of mostly administrative importance and people did not identify with them. The reform of local government in the Czech Republic in 2000 divided the country into fourteen regions, each of which adopted its own coat-of-arms. Most combine elements of the old territorial device with the coat-of-arms of the region’s major town.

**Coats-of-arms of towns and villages**

Besides regional coats-of-arms, there is also a living tradition of municipal coats-of-arms, which caught on later than that of the nobility. Coats-of-arms were awarded to towns by the nobility or the monarchy. In many municipal coats-of-arms we find elements of territorial and aristocratic motifs. The most frequent heraldic symbols are castle walls, which symbolize the right of the town to fortify itself. Smaller communities did not enjoy the right to their own coat-of-arms, even so they made use of symbols similar to those of existing heraldry. After 1990 the informal practice of town and village coats-of-arms was given an institutional framework. The Czech Parliament’s commission on heraldry (officially the Sub-Committee for Heraldry and Vexillology [the study of flags]) of the Chamber of Deputies) will, upon request, issue to a self-governing municipality a coat-of-arms, which in most cases is rooted in its ancient symbolism and corresponds fully with the rules of heraldry.

Today in the larger towns, the old municipal coats-of-arms are gradually being replaced in public use by logos. Modern logos lack historical roots and symbolic sub-texts; for that reason, however, they are probably better suited to the needs of today.